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ABSTRACT

Discrimination against the Black American Student on college campuses, and its current less blatant forms are discussed. The subtle pattern of discrimination is reflected in the curriculum, in the testing and grading systems, and in cultural events. The bulk of the paper suggests remedies and alleviations for the situation. New entrance requirements, special supportive programs for high risk minority students, and the prediction of relevancies pertinent to their future are considered basic. The focus is on opportunity and competence. Along this line, new recruitment programs and Black Studies programs are mentioned. Giving minority students a voice in planning and implementing these programs, as well as including their participation on the administrative councils of schools, is stressed. The paper concludes that colleges and universities must involve these students in the many facets of campus life. (TL)

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Minority Group Involvement in University Life

by
Kenneth E. McDiffett

Yesterday, we had the opportunity to observe and to participate in an in depth program on Black Students in Higher Education. One could easily conclude how difficult it is to do academic justice to this vital and challenging area of college life as we envision it today.

The topic I will speak to is but a minute part of the entire area of student participation in Higher Education.

We all know that the phrase "minority group" at times defies definition, and we sometimes ask ourselves, are we a member of a minority group or are we not? As for college and university students in this country, we have among many designations such minorities as the Spanish speaking student, the Mexican-American student, the American Indian and the Black American student.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, although in many cases, the comments would apply to other minority groups, my remarks today will pertain primarily to the last group mentioned ... the Black American student.

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In the light of this definition, is there prejudice, discriminition ... yes, even racism on your campus today? If you are black, the answer is an unequivocable ... yes! If you are white, the answer will be the same, but perhaps to a somewhat lesser degree. But in any case all will admit or acknowledge that there are concerns. Your campus, afterall, reflects the society around it and shares with that society many imperfections.

It has been said by some that a major source of misunderstanding is that no white, no matter his sympathy, no matter his empathy, can truly know what it means to be a black ... particularly a young black on a college campus where his group numbers less than one percent of the total student body.

A year ago, while working with three young black students and a black faculty member in a search for a Director of Black Student Affairs for our campus, I found myself in that very position. I spent hours with those students in discussing this major issue. Indeed, at last, I conceded that I just could not "put myself in their skin". Yes, to the whites the grievances are nil or at best very nominal. To the blacks, the grievances are real, and they are deeply troubled. To them, it is not an imagined situation.

It is true that the most blatant forms of minority group prejudice and discrimination have been eliminated from most college and university scenes. We recognize that the day is gone,as well it should be, when black students could not, by official college and university policies, live in on-campus housing or with a white roommate; when they were restricted to one corner of the campus Union Cafeteria; when they could frequent only a particular in-town

restaurant; or when they were restricted in certain athletic events ... both on campus and off. Yes, these practices have all but disappeared, but there remains with us a pattern so woven into the fabric of campus life that most people don't know it exists until it is pointed out to them. This quiet subtle, most often unintentional approach is reflected in the curriculum, in the testing and grading system, in cultural events and in many other areas that make up the essence of everyday campus events where it seems that life so often is designed for the middle-class white student.

When students in American colleges and universities desire to participate responsibly in the government of the institution they attend, their wish should be recognized as a claim to opportunity both for educational experience and for involvement in the affairs of their college or university. Ways should be, and must be, found to permit significant minority group student participation within the limits of attainable effectiveness. As for all students, the obstacles to such participation are many and large, and should not be minimized. We must accept the facts of inexperience, untested capacity, a transitory status which means that present action does not carry with it subsequent responsibility, and the inescapable fact that the other components of the institution are in a position of judgment over the students.

It is very important to recognize that minority student needs are just as strongly related to educational experience, both formal and informal, as any other group of students. Minority group students expect, and have a right to expect, that the educational process will be structured, that they will be stimulated and challenged

by it to become independent adults, and that they will have effectively transmitted to them their cultural heritage of the larger society.

If colleges and universities are to have support, in the fullest possible meaning, they must accept and incorporate the challenges, the freshness of view and the idealism of the vocal minority student groups.

Only during the last college generation or so have relations between the majority and minority groups been thought of as campus concerns. One reason for this is that many members of the majority group formerly believed that minorities were satisfied with their subordinate role. Since there was believed to be no dissatisfaction, there could be no concern. Now it is known to all of us that members of minorities do not like to be discriminated against and, since they often are, they are fighting back.

What then can be done to remedy or alleviate the present situation?

If there is any aspect of minority discriminition in a college or university, it has to be obliterated now. We know that this type of discrimination, like most social ills, is a thing of time, place, and circumstance. But we cannot go up to a black student and tell him we're going to take care of the problem in five years ... or even one ... from now. We cannot look to our past accomplishments, we must look to the future ... which is today!

To complicate matters further, integration ... once defined as non-discrimination and assimilation of the minority groups into the white culture ... is now dismissed by many ... especially blacks

...as an empty and sincere gesture. The grateful Negro is gone, and a new breed of angry young black has taken his place.

Prior to the sixties, many state colleges and universities were open to all graduates of the state's accredited secondary schools. Later, however, because of limited enrollment space, these same institutions, began to require applicants to stand in the upper-half or higher of their high school graduating class and to score in the upper-half of those students taking national standardized aptitude examinations. Instruction appeared to be geared to "high achievers", and this meant, for the most part, students who were well-schooled, economically secure, and white.

We now recognize that at best the usual college entrance examinations are asking the students, "What do you know"? They are not asking how well one thinks, how eager one is to learn, or what one would do with knowledge when acquired. They are probes into the memory chambers of the mind. Now, if one happens to be born poor ... and black ... and suffered the disadvantage of the kind of education and intellectual stimulation often reserved for poor blacks in America, there simply is not that much to be found in the memory chambers to allow him to be in a competitive position.

Until very recently few colleges or universities had special programs combining recruitment, admission, financial aid, counseling and academic adjustments to support high risk minority students. Frankly, most of the present programs in this area are experimental, and very few if anyone expects them to be near a one hundred percent success.

Once the minority students are on campus, what of the charge

that the curriculum on the campus is designed for white middle-class students, and is not relevant to blacks?

Relevance is a good starting point for education because it attracts people from the environment they recognize and are comfortable in, but it would be a poor college or university which failed to carry the student beyond facts and ideas which were relevant to him when he entered the system. Somewhere along the line, experienced educators must predict the relevancies pertinent to the future of the minority student, and train him to make appropriate associations of his own.

There is abroad in the land a new black awareness which has made young blacks particularly more conscious of their heritage. They enjoy what one of them called, "black music that holds a message for black people, told in a black rhythmic way and interpreted by their contemporaries with whom they can relate." This had emphasized the cultural differences between the two races, and young blacks realize they don't enjoy doing the same things as whites. They don't enjoy the same kinds of music, the same jokes, the same foods nor the same clothes. They don't even speak the same language. All this must be recognized by our educators.

It is safe to say that many colleges and universities have recognized the need for change. A great many people have become more sensitive to, and aware of, the impact and implications of racial and ethnic differences. Much attention has been paid to educational racial problems, inequalities, cruelties and crimes of the past. But have the changes been enough? One is often tempted to expect that in the area of educational inequalities, great clarity of thought, generous understanding and enlightened tolerance would be forthcoming from the college and university communities. Sadly,

however, they are lacking in this area.

What our fellow black students want and what they are entitled to is no more and no less than what all of our students want and are entitled to: namely, opportunity and competence. Willingness to learn and to assume responsibility is worthless unless there is equality of opportunity, and opportunity is worthless unless there are candidates sufficiently prepared and competent to do a good job in a responsible position. It is up to the college or university to guarantee that opportunity, it is the joint task of the college or university and the student ... black, white or otherwise ... to insure competence. Indeed, all institutions must be dedicated to this double commitment.

The respect of minority students for their college or university can be enhanced if they are given at least the following opportunities to become involved.

1. to be listened to in the classroom without fear of institutional reprisal for the substance of their views.
2. freedom to openly discuss questions of institutional policy and operation.
3. the right, as all should have, to academic due process when accused or charged with violations of institutional regulations.

On an institutional level, in the area of recruitment of minorities, many colleges and universities have begun to open their doors to black and other minority group youngsters who show even minimal promise of qualifying for college programs, despite the fact that these students' high school grades are usually below

normal college entrance standards. In one New York college, more than 300 members of this present year's freshman class are in a program called SEEK, which is designed to give the students the learning they missed in high school and thereby better adapt them to the college curriculum. Open enrollment was a major issue in some disturbances across the country, and we can see now where institutions are beginning to give this a try.

All of us have heard of attempts to provide programs related to Black Studies. This is one area of student demands where the majority of colleges and universities have made accomodations. A sincere effort is being made in many institutions to give meaningful courses on matters pertaining specifically to the black student. The examples are too numerous to mention, and I'm certain that most of you know of schools who have instituted this type of program. In addition, at most of these institutions, minority students have been given a strong voice in the planning, administrating and implementing of these programs. At New York City College, where a physicist, Dr. Robert E. Marshak, recently assumed the presidency, and where a large number of school teachers are trained, education majors are required to speak and read Spanish, as well as to have an understanding of Black and Puerto Rican history.

Finally, minority students deserve representation on governing boards and committees. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities reported again recently that students were participating on administrative councils at more than half of its member schools. Instances of minority students gaining a voice in top university councils are occurring regularly, and internal student

government involving minority students is taking on considerably more meaning and scope.

It appears then, as John W. Gardner has said in his Godkin lectures at Harvard, that "We will not find our way out of our present troubles until we have the courage to look honestly at evil where evil exists, until we foreswear hypocricy, until we call injustive and dishonor by their right names, and until a large number of educators from each sector or opinion are willing to acknowledge their own special contribution to our troubles."

I would like to close with the words of an Indian folksong.

Go my son, go and climb the ladder
Go my son, go and earn your feather
Go my son, make your people proud of you.

Work my son, get an education
Work my son, learn a good vocation
Then climb my son, go and take a lofty view.

From on the ladder of an education
You can see to help your Indian nation
Then reach my son, and lift your people up to you.

The words of this folksong paraphrase the words of the Navajo Chief Manuelito, who shortly after the time of the Navajo's release from captivity in 1868, urged his people to get a good education. The simple folk fune and the deep implication of the words make this a very popular song among the Navajo youth today. There is an urgency among them to go, to climb, to get an education and to bring their people up with them. They are no longer content to sit idly by, while the world views them as stereotyped Indians or museum pieces who should be wearing warpaint and feathers. They are determined to lead whole lives, to find their identity in our socicty and to lift their people up with them.

This very theme permeates the lives of each minority group of students. Colleges and universities must involve these students in the many facets of campus life. We must not ... we cannot ignore them!

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